



Article

Agents of Secularisation—Ibsen and the Narrative of Secular Modernity

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Abstract: In sociology, modernisation is often identified with secularisation. How can secularisation in the texts of modernism around 1900 be analysed? Literary history books tell us that the modernist authors were lucid analysts of their time who portrayed the process of secularisation going on around them in their dramas, novels or short stories. The article tries out a different approach: By conceptualizing secularisation as a cultural narrative, the perspective on the literary material changes fundamentally. The modernist authors were involved in shaping the idea of secularisation in the first place, in propagating it and in working on its implementation. They did not react to the process of secularisation with their texts. Instead, they were involved in the creation and shaping of the interpretative category ‘secularisation’. The article exemplifies this change in approach using a pivotal text of Nordic literary modernism, Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*.

Keywords: modernisation; secularisation; Henrik Ibsen; Rosmersholm; Sigmund Freud

1. What Kind of Modernity?

One of the generally accepted notions of the Scandinavian classification of period is that modernity was introduced to Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish literature when Georg Brandes gave his first lecture in his series on 19th century European literature at the University of Copenhagen in 1871: Brandes propagated a decidedly modern literature which drew its modernity from responding to the pushes for modernisation that fundamentally changed European societies in the second half of the 19th century; he registered how industrialisation and modern monetary economics were putting mental frameworks in motion, how social boundaries were opening up, how women were breaking out of traditional roles, how Christianity was losing its status. Therefore, he called for a literary awareness that covers these four important issues: the unjust distribution of property, the social stratification, the relationship between the sexes, and the social role of religion.

The conception of modernity that nowadays informs this perception of Brandes (and the literature of the Modern Breakthrough) is based on a model of modernisation that originates from sociology (Van der Loo and van Reijen 1997): A modern society is characterised by freedom and individualism, by the participation of broad sections of society in the political decision-making process, by rationality and the facilitation of life due to the mechanisation of all areas of life. Yet, even the founding fathers of sociology, namely Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, are aware of the paradox consequences and the strangely ambivalent state of mind this positively connoted process generates: Thus, the increasing domination of nature, for instance, opens up previously unimagined liberties, but the downside of power gained is the responsibility for the consequences which overwhelm modern man. The domination of nature by man also means the domination of man by man. By this, man himself becomes an object of science; he realises that what he previously considered to be his very own inner being, his immutable identity—in short: his soul—is of a contingent nature that can be easily manipulated. Thus, he becomes responsible for himself, for his actions, his attitudes in

a manner previously unknown. But, he has lost the authority (his identity or soul) that could take on this responsibility. In this sociological sense, modernity means the dilemma of the empowerment of man with his simultaneous incapacitation. Thus, in 1897 Durkheim coined the term ‘anomic suicide’ (Durkheim [1897] 2006). He uses the term to describe a new, contemporary form of suicide that he sees as characteristically modern: free, flexible, and negotiable systems, such as modern societies are, complicate the emotional integration of their citizens; this lack of integration sometimes results in a final withdrawal from this system.

Recent research in literary history rereads Brandes’ ideas of a modern literature in the light of this ambivalent modernity. It is claimed that Brandes had recognised this modernity in its core and thus became the trendsetter and mouthpiece of a young generation of authors in Scandinavia who saw themselves as radical, and whose most important representatives, such as August Strindberg, Victoria Benedictsson, Jens Peter Jacobsen, and Henrik Ibsen, had portrayed modernity in its ambivalence from the outset (e.g., Heitmann 2006, pp. 183–90). In the last 20 years, research has resumed Brandes’ four topics and identified them as focal points of the modernisation process with all its complexity and ambivalence. In the context of Scandinavian studies, this is particularly evident in the research on Henrik Ibsen: Gender, property, and social stratification issues were re-evaluated under the new paradigm (e.g., Templeton 1997; Detering 1998; Rønning 2006; Moi 2006; Evans 2008; Heitmann 2012).

Therefore, the only aspect of Brandes’ catalogue of topics that still awaits classification in the sociological paradigm of modernisation is the way in which contemporary literature dealt with the role of religion. It is surprising that it is this topic that has been left unanalysed. The decline of religion is fundamentally connected to modernisation in sociological theories: Many theorists regard the detachment from a divine supernatural father and his supertemporal order as the trigger for the processes that facilitated the development of personal responsibility, freedom, subjectivity, and rationalism. Secularisation is thus the interface between the sociological paradigm of modernisation and the catalogue of topics that Brandes designed for young writers around 1870. One must therefore concede that the most important epistemic topic regarding modernity around 1900 has been neglected so far by literary studies.

The literary texts of the epoch are not to blame. Again, Ibsen can serve as the most prominent example. Religion plays a crucial role in many of his dramas: In *Keiser og Galilæer* (*Emperor and Galilean*; 1873), which, throughout his life, Ibsen himself considered to be his most important drama, he explicitly negotiates Christianity and its apostasy from a historical-philosophical perspective; and his dramatic œuvre ends in *Når vi døde vågner* (*When We Dead Awaken*; 1899) with the image of a deaconess making the sign of the cross; this sign concludes a story about a sculptor who had become famous for his sculpture ‘The Day of Resurrection’ (‘Oppstandelsens dag’). In addition, numerous representatives of religion can be found in Ibsen’s character inventory, in *Catilina* (*Catiline*; 1850), *Kjærlighedens Komædie* (*Love’s Comedy*; 1862), *Kongs-emnerne* (*The Pretenders*; 1864), *Brand* (*Brand*; 1866),¹ *Gengangere* (*Ghosts*; 1881), *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*; 1884) or *Rosmersholm* (*Rosmersholm*; 1886). What is true for research on Ibsen holds equally true for research on Scandinavian literature in general: So far, secularisation has been neglected when it comes to describing literary modernity around 1900.

In the following, I intend to ask how this research desideratum can be approached: How can secularisation in the texts of modernism around 1900 be analysed? Firstly, I will have to approach this question conceptually: What do we mean when we talk about secularisation? For this, I will continue with the sociological model I have just presented, but I will contradict it in one important respect. My main hypothesis is that the mentioned authors were not lucid analysts of their time who portrayed the process of secularisation going on around them in their dramas, novels, or short stories; instead, they invested their own texts in the debate about how the relationship between religion and modernity should be thought of in the first place. Therefore, I will treat secularisation neither as a historical

¹ The theological aspects of *Brand* are addressed in the following: Cappelaere 2010; Gervin 2010; Tjønneland 2010.

fact nor as a sociological concept but rather as a narrative scheme. In this narratological approach, literature plays an important role not only in propagating but also in shaping what sociology later termed ‘secularisation’. Treating secularisation as a narrative is such a fundamentally novel approach that this article cannot provide more than a rough outline of a wide-ranging research project. This also holds true for the second part of this paper. There, I will exemplify the change in approach using a pivotal text of Nordic literary modernism, Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*. My analysis has a purely illustrative character and focuses exclusively on the way secularisation is narrated in the drama.

2. Secularisation in Crisis

In general, the term ‘secularisation’ denotes the shift from a sacrally legitimised society to a secularly legitimised society. The conceptual cornerstones of the term already began to emerge during the Prussian *Kulturkampf* in the middle of the 19th century (Borutta 2010) and were then discussed after 1900 within sociology as a process of modernisation. Thus, ‘secular’ was synonymous with ‘modern’. Referring to Max Weber’s well-known metaphor: the process of modernisation was the ‘disenchantment of the world’. Therefore, secularisation is defined as a process in which religion might still survive for a while, as a pre-modern relict within modernity, but will eventually disappear for good.

This concept had an almost unassailable plausibility for the self-perception of European societies. However, since the 2000s, the calls have increased for critical analyses of this idea of secularisation. This is based on solid arguments. Ever since the attacks of 9/11, the self-evidence of the secularisation theory has been disrupted in the public perception. The conviction that Europe and the world are on their way to a privatisation of religion has turned into an outdated utopia. As a direct reaction to the attacks in New York, Jürgen Habermas, for instance, coined the term of ‘post-secular society’ (Habermas 2001; Joas 2006). Furthermore, the attacks in Paris, London, Madrid, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Brussels, Berlin, etc. probably do not permit a return to former certainty either. Today, the idea of religion’s decline is therefore mere opium for the people. The fear of society’s Islamification, materialised in Anders Breivik’s attacks in Oslo, or in the German Pegida-movement, shows the crisis of the secularisation theory at the heart of Western societies.

In academic debates, one can discern two tendencies of critique towards the secularisation theorem: On the one hand, it is said that the phase of secularisation has come to an end and that, dialectically, the ‘return of the religious’ (Riesebrodt 2000) or a ‘deseccularisation’ (Berger 1999) can be registered (Graf 2004, 2014; Pollack 2003, 2009). On the other hand, it is argued that the idea of secularisation is confirmed in principle, but that it must be specified in its premises and differentiated locally and historically. Thus, functional differentiation in the modernisation process, for instance, is criticised because of its supposed or actual teleological or at least unilinear character (Joas 2012; Krech 2012; Pollack 2012). Secondly, postcolonial studies and the awareness they inspired ensured that secularisation is no longer discussed as an undisputable global process (Casanova 1994; Cady and Hurd 2010). And thirdly, historical differentiation is long overdue: Obviously, the theory of a unilinear secularisation process does not even hold true for Europe when looking at the historical sources (Gabriel et al. 2012; Osterhammel 2009).

3. Secularisation as Narrative Structure

Faced with the concept of secularisation in crisis, literary studies open up a fundamentally new perspective by defining secularisation not as a historical process, but as a narrative structure. In recent years, Albrecht Koschorke has worked intensively on surveying and developing narratological approaches, which define man’s perception of the world as being essentially structured by narrative—meaning approaches, which assume our understanding of the world as being mainly processed by narration (Koschorke 2012). In this context, Koschorke has proposed the consideration of ‘secularisation’ and the idea of ‘religion’s return’ as two narrative structures of European Modernity (Koschorke 2013). He defines the term narrative structure as an abstract model, which can be regenerated in countless individual stories. Accordingly, a narrative structure can be understood as

an interpretive framework, which can incorporate individual as well as collective experience, and which conveys narrative significance to those experiences—i.e., turning them into a convincing story that can be shared. By repeating and thus concretising the abstract pattern of the narrative structure, the individual concrete stories reaffirm the plausibility of the structure. In return, on a superior abstract level, the strengthened plausibility inspires the production of new specific individual stories. In this light, ‘secularisation’ appears to be one of those narrative models that consistently helped to generate and then stabilise the self-conception of Modern Europe. The fact that the plausibility of this secular self-interpretation has been weakened in the last 20 years makes secularisation recognisable as a narrative structure in the first place.

Therefore, the purpose of any narratological analysis must not be to criticise the content of the secularisation theorem in one point or another, or to correct it historically. Instead, it is above all a matter of understanding secularisation as a narrative structure and, furthermore, a matter of describing its components and variations as well as assessing which of its qualities is responsible for its success and durability. Koschorke identifies two main aspects. Firstly, secularisation as a narrative structure has proven to be successful—meaning powerful—because it manages to incorporate opposing dispositions: Secularisation can substantiate both progressive optimism and cultural pessimism. It can be celebrated for the gained freedom and individualism, for the domination of the world through its rational penetration, for the implementation of democratic equality *as well as* condemned for the metaphysical disorientation, the materialistic desolation, and for the weakening of social bonding forces that it can cause. This means that the narrative structure called secularisation was able to convince on a broad scale precisely *because* it serves seemingly opposing positions of world interpretation and thus allows dissent within mutual borders; it offers both its opponents and its proponents a plausible interpretation on common ground.

The second characteristic of a prolific narrative structure that was analysed by Koschorke is its ability to even incorporate facts that obviously defy the general plot (that is, the narrative about religion’s decline). For example, the massive influx of people to Christian revival movements in the 19th century must not be recorded as a counter-argument, but can be seen as a reaction to the loss of transcendence and can thus even be redefined as a confirmation of religion’s loss of relevance on a broader social level: Piety movements as social niches in which metaphysical deficits are compensated. The plot-pattern of the narrative structure thus includes potential alternatives that more or less ensure the general structure’s immunity to challenges by empiricism.

Koschorke’s first outline of a narratological approach to the phenomenon of secularisation provides a useful starting point. However, he is interested in a basic reconstruction of the narrative structure, and not in its links to literary narration; his analysis remains general and is not substantiated by the reconstruction of concrete narratives. This may be surprising because any narrative structure undoubtedly finds its own form only over the course of an evolution that takes place in specific individual narrations. The narrative structure only gradually finds its form; it develops within the medium of countless individual narrations (in fiction, on stage, in film, in everyday stories, in historiography, in journalistic texts, in political speeches ...). Within those specific narrations, concepts, alternatives, and rejections are put to the test until one or more versions of the narrative structure are canonised in the collective consciousness. Thus, my argumentation is based on the assumption that both the academic conceptualisation within sociology *and* the fiction’s testing of ‘secularisation’ as a narrative structure take place on the same structural level during the founding period around 1900. Both sides contribute to the configuration of the narrative structure by supporting it or by opposing it; however, not in the dependence of literature on conceptual discussion, but in the entanglement of both types of discourse. Thus, literary narrations of secularisation are not simply subsequent traces of a historical process or literary implementations of an already established theorem of secularisation. Instead, they are key players that participate in the shaping of the semantics of ‘secularisation’. Accordingly, the study of the relationship between secularisation and literature should focus on the following questions:

- How does literature narrate 'secularisation' around 1900?
- Which different voices and positions can be distinguished and which specific literary means of cultural self-interpretation are being used?
- Which logics do literary texts use when establishing the narrative structure in order to make the theorem credible, to disavow it, or to elaborate alternatives?

4. Rosmersholm's Schizophrenic Secularism

Henrik Ibsen's drama *Rosmersholm* from 1886 provides its audience with a great deal: a fierce power struggle between tactical politicians, a love triangle in which two women compete for a man, rejected sexual desire, incest, insanity, murder, visions of ghostly horses, the decline of an ancient family and, finally, a double suicide in front of the breathtaking scenery of a Norwegian waterfall. *Nordic noir avant la lettre*. The plot's main trigger is based around the atheist coming-out of a former parish priest: Johannes Rosmer, the last descendant of a venerable family which has produced officers, clergymen, and senior civil servants for centuries and which has essentially determined the fate of the region. This clergyman retires from the parish office and turns into a freethinker by reading works from liberal authors. Therefore, it seems only natural to interpret this story about the loss of faith as a secularisation drama.

Yet, although the focus of the story is on a renegade priest, research has yet to show any significant interest in its analytical potential with regard to secularisation.² This is also true for the most prominent reader of *Rosmersholm*. In his essay *Einige Charaktertypen aus der psychoanalytischen Arbeit* (*Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work*) from 1916, Sigmund Freud detects a prefiguration of the Oedipus complex in the drama's second protagonist, Rebekka West. Surprisingly enough, Freud is not interested in an analysis of religion, which is inherent in Johannes Rosmer's apostate story, although he himself had already recognised the Oedipus complex to be the origin of all religions in *Totem und Tabu* (*Totem and Taboo*), three years before writing his essay on *Rosmersholm*. Thus, if at least the logic behind Rebekka West's behaviour is motivated by the Oedipus complex, it is obvious that the liberation from religion experienced by Johannes Rosmer might also be potentially expressed in the terminology of the Oedipal taboo of murder and incest.

Therefore, I will first—very briefly—reconstruct the sociological variant of secularisation in Ibsen's drama, which I have outlined above, and then continue Freud's analysis of *Rosmersholm*. I hope this will show that there is a second, an anthropological version of the secularisation narrative in the play, and that this second version counters the first, i.e., the sociological one. This allows Ibsen to negotiate two different versions of the narrative structure 'secularisation'.

4.1. A Sociological Narrative of Secularisation

Rosmersholm develops its plot in two main lines that coincide at one particular point in the story. The first of these plot lines is characterised by making clear references to the contemporary political situation in Norway. The drama was published in 1886, two years after parliamentarism was introduced to Norway (Tuchenhagen 2009, pp. 108–9). Henceforth, the country was headed by a government that consisted of elected politicians from the strongest party in parliament instead of by a collective of civil servants who were appointed by the king. This new political system of party competition also included the respective media that was able to form public opinion. Thus, Ibsen's drama begins with a visit from headmaster Kroll, a conservative politician, who intends to propose his friend Rosmer as an editor and writer for a newly established conservative local newspaper; as the descendant of an old and influential family, Rosmer could benefit the conservative party. The new paper is mainly supposed to represent an ideological counterbalance to the liberal newspaper '*Blinkfyret*' (Beacon).

² Analytical approaches can be found for instance in (Durbach 1977).

Even the editor of this very paper, Peder Mortensgård, appears at Rosmersholm shortly after Kroll's visit and tries to sway the head of the household.

This one aspect—parliamentarianism and the emergence of the free press as a means of political opinion making in a liberal democracy—will suffice in order to illustrate that Ibsen outlines a social context for his plot that complies with the same logics as the context which sociologists refer to as the 'process of modernisation' 30 years later—and which suggests that European societies had developed from being traditionally stratified to modern and functionally structured social systems (Rønning 2006, pp. 209–28). Rosmer's estrangement from God and his new conviction that people should and must shape their lives by their own efforts correspond with this social development. As Rosmer puts it: 'There is no other' power to help (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 244)—meaning no divine power to rely on. Accordingly, Rosmer's personal story of secularisation is embedded in the collective narrative of secularisation I outlined in chapter 1.

The second main plot line focuses on the relationship between Rosmer and his wife, Beate, and on his relationship with his wife's companion, Rebekka West. Rebekka had joined the household of the priest Johannes Rosmer long before the curtain rises—initially, in order to care for his sick wife, Beate. Rebekka had been raised as a freethinker by her adoptive father, Dr. West, but conceals this fact. Coming to Rosmersholm, she finds that Rosmer is receptive to liberal ideas. She provides him with relevant literature and paves the way for him to atheism. Rosmer believes they are kindred spirits in a platonic friendship. However, soon Rebekka would like to take the place of the lady of the house in every respect. To achieve this, she cunningly leads the childless Beate to suicide by placing one of the liberal texts read by Rosmer into Beate's hands. The text argues that marriage is only justified if descendants have been conceived. By hinting at the same time that she is pregnant by Rosmer, Rebekka leads Beate to believe that she, Beate, has to quit the field in order to guarantee her husband's future happiness. When the curtain rises on the first act, Beate has been dead for one year. Rebekka still lives at Rosmersholm.

This stable constellation collapses when the two plot lines cross each other: Rosmer feels compelled by the political conflict between headmaster Kroll and the editor Mortensgård to admit his newly won atheism. Kroll suspects Rebekka's scheme, forcing Rebekka to confess. With the help of this confession, Kroll manages to prevent Rosmer's involvement with the liberals. Thus, the political conflict culminates in Rosmer, a sincere person interested in freedom and liberality, being checkmated by the power-seeker Kroll. The fact that Rosmer and Rebekka commit joint suicide at the end of the last act by throwing themselves down the same waterfall Beate died in is an expression of their moral breakdown according to this interpretation: Deprived of their mission in life, which was to convert other humans to be freethinkers, they choose death, brokenhearted and hopeless.

In fact, this interpretation also fits in with a particular tradition within the reception of Ibsen's work. Dr. Stockmann, for instance, the protagonist in Ibsen's *En folkefiende* (*An Enemy of the People*) from 1882, finds himself in a similar situation (e.g., Rønning 2006, p. 212): He too, is betrayed by political friends, yet, at the end of the drama, he decides to fight against all odds. Ibsen repeats this set-up in *Rosmersholm*, but in a slightly different experimental arrangement, namely by using a weak character who lacks the will to resist. One reason why Stockmann persists and Rosmer perishes can be found easily within the argumentation developed so far. As a medical doctor, Stockmann is a scientist and therefore a representative of secular modernity, whereas Rosmer is a former clergyman and thus a representative of the religiously legitimised pre-modern era. His failure can be ascribed to his primal and therefore still influential bonds to Christianity.³ He cannot get over his indirect responsibility for the death of his wife and does not dare enter an emotionally and sexually satisfying relationship with Rebekka—although such a relationship would be justified, even in the eyes of all other characters.

³ Cf. for instance: "Indem Ibsen Rosmer zum *Pastor* macht [...], erklärt er die christliche Askese, wie Nietzsche, zum Ressentiment aus Impotenz bzw. Ohnmacht, und verbindet sie mit Gesetzesfetischismus und Überich-Hypertrophie." (Hiebel 1990, p. 137).

Thus, the death of such a weak protagonist as Rosmer is to be understood as collateral damage in the process of secular modernity. This very short sketch must suffice to illustrate what I would like to call the sociologically motivated narration of secularisation embedded in *Rosmersholm*.

4.2. Secular Guilt

The second kind of secularisation, the anthropologically motivated narrative of secularisation, becomes obvious if *Rosmersholm* is reconstructed based on the notion of guilt.⁴ By collecting the statements about freedom and happiness made by the atheist Rosmer throughout the drama, only very vague ideas about the subject will be found. Yet, one thing is obvious: Rosmer believes he will be able to get rid of his feeling of guilt if he gets rid of religion. His ideal: ‘Quiet, happy innocence.’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 270)—‘Happiness [. . .] is more than anything that serene, secure, happy freedom from guilt.’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 279)—‘Any cause that is to win a lasting victory must have at its head a happy and guiltless man.’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 282)—‘your happy innocence’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 290)—‘Yes, innocence. Where happiness and contentment are found.’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 302). The Norwegian original makes it even clearer by repeating the words skyldfrihed/skyldfri again and again: ‘Den stille, glade skyldfrihed.’ (Ibsen 2009, p. 418)—‘Lykke [. . .], det er først og fremst den stille, glade, trygge følelse af skyldfrihed.’ (Ibsen 2009, p. 436)—‘Den sag, som skal vinde frem til varig sejr, —den må bæres af en glad og skyldfri mand.’ (Ibsen 2009, p. 440)—‘din glade skyldfrihed’ (Ibsen 2009, p. 456)—‘Skyldfriheden, ja. I den er lykken og glæden’ (Ibsen 2009, p. 482).

One could rightly assume that being free of guilt is the result of the abolition of a judging divine entity. Within the play, this idea is tested but then dismissed with the example of sexuality: When the other characters are told that Rosmer has lost his faith, everyone is convinced that he shares not only board but also the bed with his companion Rebekka West. Whether it is his wife Beate, headmaster Kroll, the editor Mortensgård, or the housekeeper Madam Helseth, they all interpret Rosmer’s behaviour according to this logic: As soon as God’s punitive gaze disappears, the same applies to the guilty conscience; a mind freed of religion is followed by free love. This logic would fit into the interpretation presented above: Social secularisation and sexual liberation go hand in hand. But, although everyone else might think this way, Rosmer does not. When he learns about the accusations, he reacts indignantly: ‘Ah . . . ! So you don’t think there is any sense of virtue to be found among freethinkers? Doesn’t it strike you they might have a natural instinct for morality?’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 257). One might see these statements as the new phrasing of old Christian austerity and thus Rosmer’s atheist asexual freedom as self-delusion. Yet, one has to take into account that there is no reason for Rosmer to feel guilty—even if he is still influenced by a Christian denial of drives and instincts. For there is nothing going on between him and Rebekka. And, where there is no offence, there is no reason for remorse. Consequently, the guilty conscience that he thinks he can get rid of as an atheist must have been caused by something other than the Christian fear of sexuality. So, how does Rosmer define guilt after his lapse in faith? Which guilt is dissipated by his new lifestyle in which sexual abstinence is obviously an essential element?

To answer these questions, it is helpful to consider Freud’s analysis of Rebekka West in his essay *Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytical Work*, because Freud integrates sexuality into the wider context of its social function. Freud shows very convincingly that Rebekka joins a constellation corresponding to the Oedipal triangle by taking up her new employment at Rosmersholm: Being a young woman herself, she encounters a married couple that, owing to their age and authority,

⁴ For my following argumentation, I owe thanks to the chapter ‘Totem, Tabu og Skuld. Om *Rosmersholm* (1886)’ in Atle Kittang’s important book *Ibsens Heroisme. Frå Brand til Når vi døde vågner* (Kittang 2002). Kittang analyses *Rosmersholm* with the help of *Totem and Taboo*, but (a) he is not interested in the religious-analytical potential of Ibsen’s drama and is therefore not interested in the concept of secularisation. (b) He interprets the relationship between Freud’s theory and Ibsen’s drama in a completely different way. According to him, Freud realises man’s anthropological basis and, with the help of Freud’s terminology, he shows how even Ibsen represents this anthropology. Freud becomes his template to read Ibsen. I, however, intend to emphasise that both Ibsen and Freud work on the same project.

occupies the position of imaginary parents. Rebekka lusts for the parent of the opposite sex (meaning the imaginary father Rosmer)—she herself talks about ‘wild, uncontrollable passion’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 299)—and therefore orchestrates the suicide of the parent belonging to the same sex (meaning the imaginary mother Beate). The puzzling question challenged by Freud is, why does Rebekka first rejoice at Rosmer’s marriage proposal and thus the fulfilment of her wishes, but vehemently rejects his proposal the very next moment? How can that happen? Freud argues that later on in the story, Rebekka is forced to recognise that her adoptive father, Dr. West, who became her first lover, is actually also her biological father. This means she actually not only broke the taboo of killing by intriguing against her symbolical mother Beate, but also broke the taboo of incest with her biological father, Dr. West. When Rosmer asks her to marry him, she shies away from repeating this taboo of incest with her symbolical father Rosmer.

I quote Freud: ‘Everything that happened to her at Rosmersholm, her falling in love with Rosmer and her hostility to his wife, was from the first a consequence of the Oedipus complex—an inevitable replica of her relations with her mother and Dr. West’ (Freud 2001b, p. 330). Ibsen’s poetic achievement consists of illustrating the model that everyone experiences in an imaginary form during the period of initial socialisation, which is at the age of three or four, through his particular set of characters. In other words: The symbolical father (in Rebekka’s case it is of course the mother) is always more important than the real one.⁵ In whatever way the biological father might behave himself, he becomes a surface onto which the symbolical father is projected. This symbolical father figure claims the object of desire for himself and therefore has to be eliminated by the son. The desire to kill causes the emergence of a guilty conscience, which only then turns the individual into a human being who can put their immediate desire aside for the sake of the community. That is exactly what happens when Rebekka denies herself the rewards of her scheme. She describes it as follows: ‘It is the Rosmer philosophy of life [...] that has infected my will. [...] Made it a slave to laws that had meant nothing to me before’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 301). Here—in a guilty conscience—lies the link that opens Freud’s analysis of a single character to anthropological speculation about the beginning of all religion in *Totem and Taboo*.

4.3. Ibsen’s *Totem and Taboo*

In accordance with the knowledge formations of his time, in his analytical essay on religion, Freud assumes that totemism is the archetype of all religions. All other religions and even his own period, which was critical of religion, should consequently be regarded as derivations of the one cultural achievement that was generated by totemism. Consequently, *Totem and Taboo* resembles the prolegomena of a narrative of secularisation which—and this is how one certainly can interpret Freud—reaches its desired goal through psychoanalysis. Yet, in contrast to the sociological version that was later canonised in Europe’s cultural consciousness, this particular narrative of secularisation is not centred around a turning point where society’s sacral legitimisation turns into a secular one. Rather, it is a narrative with an anagnorisis, a recognition. What is being recognised is that the process that originally created religion makes every individual a social human being, that phylogenesis and ontogenesis correlate—and that the core of religious ambivalence (‘the simultaneous existence of love and hate towards the same object,’ Freud 2001a, p. 157) will not be overcome by turning away from Christianity.

So, what constitutes this capacity for creating religions that totemism passed on to all following religions? It is precisely in the sense of repentance. In the following, I will extensively quote from *Totem and Taboo*’s best-known passage, in which Freud talks more comprehensively about history’s first

⁵ Hiebel states the same in his analysis of *Rosmersholm* (pp. 145–46): ‘Wieder ist die symbolische Vaterschaft wichtiger als die biologische, reale.’ That is the reason why Ibsen introduces Rebekka’s adoption by Dr. West. Rebekka’s legal father, Gamvik, never appears, ‘weil er nicht von der Aurole des Symbolischen umgeben war’.

patricide.⁶ Its origin lies in the Darwinian primal horde which is governed by ‘a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up’ (Freud 2001a, p. 141): “One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. [. . .] They hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too. After they had got rid of him, [. . .] the affection which had all this time been pushed under was bound to make itself felt. It did so in the form of remorse. A sense of guilt made its appearance [. . .]. The dead father became stronger than the living one had been—[. . . The brothers] revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced its fruits by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free. They thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevitably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex” (Freud 2001a, pp. 141–43).

Thus, the various religions are to be regarded as versions of the deification of the father as a reaction to an experienced guilt. Consequently, the basic feeling of guilt that religion is struggling with, derives—according to Freud—only partially from illicit desire, and most certainly from the experience of patricide which is being transferred from generation to generation—at least in its imaginary form.

In Ibsen’s drama, the same concept of guilt can be found in statements made by the character Rosmer. This becomes clear at a point in the story in which Rosmer is not talking about his own guilt, but the feelings of guilt and shame that drove his wife Beate into suicide. In fact, he calls them ‘grundløse’/‘unnecessary’: ‘the way she used to reproach herself quite unnecessarily’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 254—‘hendes grundløse, fortærende selvbefejdelser’, Ibsen 2009, p. 387). What he means by that is that ‘she had been told that she would never have any children’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 254). Thus, Beate’s feeling of guilt stems from not being able to continue the Rosmers’ genealogical succession—a genealogy that is not only omnipresent to the residents at Rosmersholm, but also to the theatre audience. The first thing the audience sees as the curtain is rising is ‘the living-room at Rosmersholm’ in which the eponymous genealogy has an overwhelming presence: ‘The walls are hung with past and recent portraits of clergymen, officers and officials in their robes and uniforms’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 223). Asbjørn Aarseth has called this stage scenery the most extreme example of an Ibsenesque effect of claustrophobia (Aarseth 1999, p. 174). There is also a second aspect I would like to emphasise. Even if the motif of infertility is well known as a punishment by God or Gods in the history of religion, it is in fact the opposite that is emphasised by Rosmer in the statement above—i.e., that these feelings of guilt are ‘grundløse’/‘unnecessary’. It is Ibsen’s intention to demonstrate at various points in his plot that it is precisely this carefree attitude toward filiation (meaning the continuation of genealogy) that represents the crucial novelty of Rosmer’s atheist attitude. The freedom he experiences through his apostasy is not related to suppressed sexuality; as I have shown earlier, he has little or no interest in Eros—no matter which way one chooses for interpreting this fact; what actually turned out to be a burden instead, was the duty to continue the family line. The text repeatedly emphasises that atheism represents a betrayal of the fathers. From the various text passages, I will quote only one: ‘The descendant of these men here looking down on us . . . he’ll not escape so easily from what has been handed down unbroken from generation to generation’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 284).⁷

⁶ Does this narrative simply represent a heuristic artifice that is supposed to make an unrepresentable circumstance plausible? Many commentators on Freud’s work adopt this train of thought. Yet, Freud himself does not speak of an invention of fiction but of a ‘lack of precision,’ ‘its abbreviation of the time factor and its compression of the whole subject-matter’ in his narrative (Freud 2001a, pp. 142–43).

⁷ Another example is Rebekka’s speech ‘Oh, all these doubts, these fears, these scruples—they are just part of the family tradition. The people here talk about the dead coming back in the form of charging white horses.’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 281). And Rosmer himself formulates it as follows: ‘To me it seems I have a bounden duty to bring a little light and happiness into those places where the Rosmers have spread gloom and oppression all these long years,’ to which Kroll answers sarcastically: ‘Yes, that would indeed be an undertaking worthy of the man who is the last of his line’ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 259).

For Rosmer, being childless is—in contrast to Beate—no reason for a guilty conscience. Instead, the filiation that he is committed to represents the instance that causes his guilty conscience. The analogy to Freud is unmistakable. Rosmer's atheism proves to be something deeper than just a lapse of faith. Like Freud, he focuses on religion itself and furthermore, just like Freud, he recognises religion's basic pattern to be the divine idealisation of a dead father figure who rules the son through a sense of guilt. The freedom of guilt that Rosmer experiences due to atheism is thus indeed obtained through sexual abstinence. Not because sexual desire in itself is forbidden, but because sexuality could potentially continue the sequence of guilt. This succession can only be dissolved without a child. Remaining childless does not constitute the cause for religious feeling of guilt (like for Beate), but as the remedy against an anthropologically construed guilt. Rosmer, consequently, does not interpret his asexual relationship to Rebekka as a sign of pathological loss of libido, but as the beginning of a love that evades the system of guilt, because it is not meant to produce descendants. Rosmer refuses to become a father himself. The imaginary unification with Rebekka⁸ through their joint suicide is the ultimate manifestation of this refusal. According to Freud, the history of religion is a constant variation of symbolical patricide and its remorselessly attempted annulment. Rosmer also recognises this connection. His anagnorisis leads him to the only rebellion a son can make towards his father that does not perpetuate the filiation of the father's power and the son's guilt. He refuses the identification with his father by refusing to become a father himself.

Finally, there is one further aspect I would also like to address: Does Ibsen give his audience any hints on how to normatively interpret *Rosmersholm's* joint suicide? Should it be understood as a heroic rebellion, an existential break with genealogy's logics, with the original crime at the beginning of humanity, which inevitably enslaves man in a regime of guilt? Or, is the crime instead found at the end of the play? Is it possible that the joint suicide represents a crime against life itself, which is—despite (or rather because of) its inevitable entanglement in guilt—still precious, worth living, and lovable? Ibsen does not provide an answer. Of course not! But the question once again leads me back to Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, more accurately to one specific phrasing in the German original of the previously quoted text passage, which contains a certain revelational potential. After the brothers of the primal horde have eliminated their father, the following happens: 'es entstand ein Schuldbewußtsein.' (Freud [1913] 1999, p. 173—'it appeared a sense of guilt'; in the words of the Standard Edition: 'A sense of guilt made its appearance' (Freud 2001a, p. 143)). When dealing with an author who is as conscious of style as Freud is, it must be noticed that he uses the syntactic expletive 'es' (Engl.: it)—a pronoun that does not possess any semantic content. It is used, both in German and in English, because grammatically correct sentences require a grammatical subject—as seen in the examples 'it rains' ('es regnet') or 'it seems' ('es scheint'). This expletive 'it' hides the fact that a sense of guilt does not appear out of thin air. Instead, it needs a prerequisite; and this prerequisite is not the crime, but love and thus the obligation towards loved ones. The deed only becomes a crime when this obligation is violated. Thus, even in Freud's narrative about the primal horde, culture does not really originate through crime, but through love, which makes the deed a crime in the first place. Felix culpa!

5. Agents of Secularisation

I hope it has become clear that *Rosmersholm* presents two very different narratives of secularisation and even confronts them with one another. One of them resembles the narrative which was later canonised by sociology and thus became essential for the European perception of modernity. According to this narrative, the transition into a modern society requires the dismissal of any finalised metaphysical order—resulting in the ambivalent emotional simultaneity of freedom and alienation. It interprets the joint suicide at the end of the drama as collateral damage brought about by the process of modernisation. Nevertheless, if one approaches the issue of guilt, then one instead encounters a different model

⁸ (Ibsen [1886] 1960, p. 311): 'For now we two are one.'

of secularization—a model that admittedly manages to abolish institutionalised religion, but posits religion's origin, namely the sense of guilt, as an anthropological constant at the same time. In this light, the suicide at the end of the drama turns into a refusal to transfer the sense of guilt that came from the original crime to a new son.

Furthermore, I hope it has become clear that Freud's psychoanalysis or the sociological idea of modernisation is not simply regarded as my model for interpreting Ibsen in the same way shown by previous research on Ibsen (e.g., Gerland 1998). Ibsen should not simply be understood as a clear-sighted observer of his time who recognised the society's process of secularisation and chose it as a topic for his drama. Yet, at the same time, he must not be understood as a psychoanalyst *avant la lettre*, who already surmised religion's secular 'truth', which was later made public by Freud. Instead, he conceptualises different narratives of secularisation, he even confronts them with one another and thus puts their plausibility to the test. In this way, like Freud and the founding fathers of sociology, he becomes a powerful agent, who contributes to the narrative structure's composition.

By embracing the challenge presented above of thinking of secularisation as a narrative structure, the perspective on the literary material to be analysed changes fundamentally. The argument that suggests that Strindberg, Ibsen, Jacobsen, Lagerlöf, etc. should be regarded as lucid interpreters of their time, because they concur with the results of the sociological paradigm developed by Simmel, Weber, Parsons, and others, represents an anachronism, because it disregards the fact that the mentioned Scandinavian authors themselves were important agents of discourse formation. They lived before there was a social consensus that defined history as a process of secularisation; in fact, they were involved in shaping the idea of secularisation in the first place, in propagating it and in working on its implementation. They did not react to the process of secularisation with their texts. Instead, they were involved in the creation and shaping of the interpretative category 'secularisation'. Therefore, their texts should not (solely) be read as time-diagnostic sources but as performative-political investments.

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